

HOMILY for 24th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A

This Sunday's Readings talk about loving & reconciling with our neighbors; reflecting on that, I'm reminded of this cute story I'd to share with you.

Three older Jewish mothers were sitting on a park bench in Miami Beach talking about how much their sons love them.

Sadie said, "You know the Monet painting hanging in my living room? My son, Irving, bought that for me for my seventy-fifth birthday. What a good boy he is, & how much he loves his mother."

Gertie said, "You call that love? You know that new Tesla electric car I got for Mother's Day? That's from my son Bernie. What a doll!"

Golda, in turn, replied, "That's nothing. You know my son Stanley? He's in counseling with a psychiatrist on Park Avenue. Five sessions a week – and what does he talk about? Me!"

Anyhow, last Sunday we were called to reconcile with one another & with God as we were given step by step on how to do it, even involving the Church as the last resort. Basically we were asked to be our brother/sister's keeper & try to help him/her move away from his/her past way of life, but leave all the judgments to God. This Sunday, we are invited to get to the next step of the reconciliation process, which is forgiveness. That is why Peter came up to Jesus in today's Gospel & asked, "Lord, when my brother/sister wrongs me, how often must I forgive him/her? Seven times?" "No," Jesus replied, "not seven times; I say, seventy times seven times." Evidently Peter realized that someone would eventually wrong him or be in disagreement with him at some point. So, what must he do? Should he forgive the person who hurt him? Would seven times be enough for him to forgive each person & then he can hold on to grudges against this person for the rest of his life?

First of all, we should commend Peter for coming to that realization & not trying to ignore the inevitable conflicts with people around him. Many people would not think twice about making reconciliation with someone who wronged them. But, Peter had that foresight because he just made his Master a couple of weekends ago so mad that Jesus called him "Satan" & told him to get out of his sight. Secondly, we must applaud Peter because he was willing to forgive someone who wronged him, not once but seven times. He thought that seven times would be more than enough to forgive a wrong doer.

If the various groups in the Middle East would forgive one another that many times, we would not have all the violence & killings happening over there since the Biblical time. Or, if all the violent shooters would try to forgive their neighbors like Peter did, we would not see all the senseless shootings happening in our country & around the world almost every week. Or, if Republicans and Democrats, in fact all politicians, would learn to think like Peter & forgive one another just half of his times, we would get more good things done for our country & less bickering like we see now. So, Peter was certainly much different than most human beings despite his personal weaknesses, including denying his Master in the near future once being under pressure. He knew the importance of reconciliation & forgiveness in a relationship & community. That is one of the important reasons for Jesus to pick Peter, instead of his favorite disciple John or another disciple, to build His Church. For Peter knew what it takes to maintain a peaceful & compassionate community. It takes reconciliation & forgiveness up to seven times in his humble opinion.

However, Jesus did not praise Peter for forgiving someone seven times. Instead, He challenged him to do it seventy times seven times. In other words, He wanted Peter & all His future disciples like us to keep on forgiving people around us. Although Peter did not ask Jesus why he must do so, I'm sure we all want to ask that question for him. Knowing that, Jesus told us the emotional story in today's Gospel to give us one of the reasons to forgive our neighbors over & over again. Here is the reason & conclusion of the story, "...I [the Master] cancelled your entire debt when you pleaded with me. Should you not have dealt mercifully with your fellow servant, as I dealt with you? Then in anger, the Master handed him [the unforgiving servant] over to the torturers until he paid back all that he owed. My Heavenly Father, [said Jesus] will treat you in exactly the same way unless each of you forgives his brother/sister from his heart." So, Jesus seemed to tell us that we must forgive his brother/sister because we owe God a huge debt. If we don't try to forgive them, God will treat us the same way.

In case we did not hear that message clearly, today's First Reading/the Book of Sirach reminds us with this message, "...Forgive your neighbor's injustice; then when you pray, your own sins will be forgiven... Remember your last days, set enmity aside; remember death & decay, & cease from sin! Think of the Commandments, hate not your neighbor; of the Most High's Covenant, & overlook faults." So, we're encouraged to detach ourselves from hate & anger & learn to forgive our neighbors. That way we'll be forgiven when we ask God to forgive us. If we can't think of forgiving our neighbors like that, at least consider the Last Day & try to prepare for it by settling our differences with God & everyone around us. If we can do that, we will have a good chance of being able to stand tall before the Almighty Judge of the living & the dead at the Gate of Heaven.

My dear brothers & sisters, a wise person once said, "To sin is human; to forgive is divine." It is certainly very difficult for us to forgive someone who has wronged/hurt us. It takes time & lots of prayer & effort to forgive & forget past hurts. But, with the great examples of forgiveness of our Lord & other saints in our Christian Tradition, we can learn to be divine & try to let go of our anger & past hurts caused by our neighbors. Once we do that, we can find ourselves to be like Jesus & be prepared to stand before God/the Almighty Judge on the Last Day.